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# The Language of St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas: A Study of Their Vocabulary on Mercy

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# The Language of St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas: A Study of their Vocabulary on Mercy

How important is mercy in our ethics?[1] Human justice gives the judge the right to pronounce a defendant innocent or guilty, the right to punish or to alleviate a punishment; but can we foresee cases of mercy where the judge will have the right to suspend a punishment and therefore to pardon, because a punishment will cause the guilty to suffer beyond what he can endure?[2] And yet, mercy is put forward as an argument to obtain the legalization of abortion. Abortion is considered a work of pity towards the child who will be born unable to have a true human life, and also a work of pity towards the mother and the father who will be in deep distress with such a child. Is this pity true mercy, an effect of true love for our neighbor?

The Middle Ages knew these discussions about mercy under other forms. The theologians were especially concerned to explain the biblical texts which describe on one hand the justice of God, and on the other hand the mercy of God. St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas elaborated their theological language, using primarily a Latin tradition which had evolved for twelve centuries. From this tradition they received a Christian terminology based on the Bible and formed by the *auctoritates* of the preceding centuries. They explained the different meanings of the terminology according to the four biblical senses which became classical:[3] the literal, the metaphorical, the tropological, and the anagogical. They used the *pro et contra* method to clarify questions, and when they elaborated their synthesis, they analyzed vocabulary, establishing distinctions and oppositions between the terms.

The study of the terminology *misericordia*, *misericors*, *misereor*, etc. shows how the methods of Scholastic theology had a great impact on the evolution of the meanings of these terms – either to qualify God (as merciful) or to show human qualities (natural or supernatural). These meanings tended to become

[1] See General Bibliography at the end of article.

[2] Cf. Smart, Alwynne, "Mercy." in *Philosophy,* 43 (1968), 345-59; Card, Claudia, "On Mercy," in *The Philosophical Review,* 81 (1972) 182-207.

[3] De Marco, Donald, "Abortion, Pregnancy as Peace Movement and Humanicide." Three essays in *Review for Religious,* 31 (1972), p. 941.



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strict definitions in the classification of virtues, gifts, and beatitudes, which embody Christian perfection.

### St. Bonaventure

Bonaventure does not work as a philologist, but as a theologian of the 13th century. Reading and commenting on the Scriptures, he defines his theological terminology. He elaborates the doctrine to be preached and the questions to be discussed. Furthermore, he builds a synthesis of the spiritual qualities by which the disciples of Christ become perfect. The biblical text, therefore, is the basis of the terminology in its signification. It is also a kind of lexicon because of the references from one text to another. Moreover, the text or *Glossa* is in reality a Holy Scripture "glossed" by paraphrases and patristic citations: the *Glossa ordinaria* giving a commentary and the *Glossa interlinearis* explaining the terms. Finally, the *Sententia* of Peter Lombard served as a theological sourcebook, and allowed for a more didactic presentation of the questions, e.g., the comparison between *justitia* and *misericordia*. As we know, Bonaventure builds his theological synthesis on the theory of the Divine Exemplarity. For the purposes of our terminology, this theory can be explained by the passage from Luke, "Be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful." (Luke 6:36)

For the philological analysis of *misericordia*, Bonaventure follows the definition of St. Gregory the Great,[4] "Now *misericordia* (commiseration) is derived from *miserum cor* (a miserable heart). When an individual sees a person wretched, and sympathizes with him, he also is affected with grief of mind. He himself makes his heart miserable that he may free from misery the man he is set on."[5] Therefore *misericordia* presupposes misery which evokes mercy or pity.[6] We look at this misery in order to alleviate it, as Jesus did for the adulterous woman.[7] In this example we also see that mercy goes with justice and does not destroy it. This relation *miseria*, *misericordia* is a basis for our prayer. Bonaventure distinguishes three steps in the act of prayer:[8] first, the *deploratio miseriae*. We confess and deplore our miseries. Secondly, *imploratio misericordiae*. We ask for mercy. Thirdly, *exhibitio latriae*. Worship of adoration becomes possible through the grace we receive from the divine mercy. Furthermore, this worship

[4] XXth Moralia, c.29, no. 63, trans. taken from *Morals on the Book of Job*, Vol. II, parts III and IV, Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1845, p. 497.

[5] Cf. in Joan. V. 17 – Op. VI, 306 (ed. Quaracchi).

[6] "Misereri," in Sap. IX – Op. VI, 166.

[7] In Joan. VIII, 10 – Op. VI, 355.

[8] De tripl. via II, 1s – Op. VIII, 8s

is not only a *reverentia* but *benevolentia* towards God, which is perfect when it comes from our consideration of the immense mercy of God.

The terminology is made precise and defined through a variety of synonyms and sometimes antonyms.[9] For example, in a homily on John 4:49 (Jesus curing the son of the royal official),[10] the greatness (*magnificentia*) of God is manifested in Jesus through his *pietas indicibilis misericordiae in parcendo. Pietas, misericordia, parcere* express the greatness of God under the aspect of piety, sparing the sinner. In that explanation St. Bonaventure quotes Psalm 102:8, "*miserator et misericors Dominus longanimis et multum misericors.*" *Miserator* means a clemency which does not punish, *misericors* means a total forgiveness, and *multum misericors* means to undertake with clemency (*suscipiendo clementer*), like the father towards the prodigal son.

Let us note here that mercy is not defined in opposition to justice. Psalm 24:10 unites *misericordia et veritas* (*justitia*). St. Bonaventure reasserts the multiple meanings of these terms. Thus *justitia* has the biblical meaning of holiness in general;[11] but the term strictly indicates the cardinal virtue by which one renders proper due to another. Finally a special aspect of this virtue is *severitas* – to punish.

Mercy completes justice because they both are moral virtues which must find the golden mean (*via media*). Charity as a theological virtue has no limits, but justice as a virtue balancing our moral life will be destroyed if it becomes excessively severe. Likewise, mercy cannot pass over what is fitting for goodness.[12]

In the practice of giving alms, the two virtues must be distinguished.[13] To give alms because it is due (*sub ratione debiti*) is a work of justice; to give alms in order to relieve another's misery (*misereri*) is a work of mercy and also of piety.[14] This other terminology, *pietas-misericordia*, is also explained by Bonaventure.[15] When he defines the gift of piety (*donum pietatis*), he gives the various meanings of *pietas* and other similar words. Mercy is a virtue which conforms us to our nature when we see another's misery, because we see in him someone of our own kind. Piety is a gift of the Holy Spirit by which we see in the other the image of God. We are conformed to the supernatural order of divine sonship. In summary, mercy looks at the misery in man – the created image of God (*con-*

[9] Ibid., II, 7 – Op. VIII, 9.
[10] XX Pom. Pent., Sermo I – Op. IX, 431.
[11] Sent. III, Dist., dub. 1 – Op. III, 728.
[12] "Conveniens," Sent. IV, Dist. 46, art 2, q. 4 – Op IV, 966.
[13] Sent. III, Dist. 33, dub. 1 – Op. III, 728.
[14] "Pietas," – cf. Sent. IV, Dist. 15, pars 2, dub. 5 – Op. IV, 377-378.
[15] Sent. III, Dist. 35, q. 6, concl – Op. III, 785-786.

*siderat miseriam in imagine*); piety looks at the image of God in the wretched (*imaginem in misero*).

From a practical perspective, we see that the terms *pietas, misericordia, clementia* frequently have the same general meaning: *miserere* – to have pity for our distressed neighbor. But we have to analyze more precisely the use of the terminology *misericordia, misericors*, etc.

Through the text *Per viscera misericordiae Dei nostri* from the canticle of Zechariah (Luke 1:78), through the depths (bowels) of the divine mercy, Bonaventure retains the most astonishing biblical aspect of divine mercy, an Hebraic image taken from our emotions which are closely bound with our body, an emotion moving us deeply within when facing the misery of others. The Greek word in Luke translates literally *dia splagchna eleous* (through the bowels of mercy). The Latin replaced the image by another one more noble – the heart (*miserecordia*). But the Hebraic image also corresponds to another one used by St. John (1:18), *in sinu patris*, a maternal image. It is the mother who bears her child within her womb.

Bonaventure comments on Luke 1:78 by first applying a definition underlying another aspect of divine mercy: *nimia dilectio et nimia compassio.*[16] It is an "excess of love and compassion," mercy which exceeds our imagination and even all measure. In this meaning, Bonaventure refers to Ephesians 2:4, *Deus qui dives est in misericordia propter nimiam caritatem suam*, and to Isaiah 63:15, *Ubi est multitudo viscerum tuorum et miserationum tuarum*? But for Bonaventure the image of this deep mercy is verified in God by the fact that the Word became flesh. Joseph in the Old Testament is Christ's prefigurement: "*commota sunt viscera sua super fratre suo Benjamin.*"(Genesis 43:30) And we have to imitate the depth of this mercy according to the text of St. Paul (Colossians 3:12): "*induite sicut electi Dei, viscera misericordiae,*" clothe yourself with deep mercy. Finally, Bonaventure qualifies this mercy as *visceralis.*[17] We have to understand God with great piety (*piissime*) and to admire and embrace his immense mercy as supremely benevolent (*summe benignam*) in the assumption of our mortal humanity, as supremely deep (*summe visceralem*) in the suffering of the cross and death.

Bonaventure, in his commentary on Luke, finds the terminology of *misericordia* in chapter 15 with the parable of "the father and his sons" – the title which he gives.[18] The biblical text shows the father moved by mercy (*misericordia motus*), forgetting all the unworthiness of his son and celebrating a feast.

[16] In Lc. II, 138 – Op. VII, 42.
[17] De Regimine Animae II, – Op. VIII, 128.
[18] Comment. in Lc., c. XV, 21 – Op. VII, 389.

This attitude of the father scandalized the elder son who remained faithful. Bonaventure translates the text with different terms: *clementia, pietas, misericordia.* He contrasts the impiety (*impietas*) of the Pharisees with divine clemency (*clementia*) manifested in the father's works of piety (*pietas*). The parallel is between the *impietas Judaica* and *pietas divina.* This terminology is complemented by another context which shows the underlying theology of salvation: *reparatio, reconciliatio, redemptio.* The text reads: "*Pietas Dei* is manifest especially toward humans in the reparation of humankind where people need a sacrifice of reconciliation, a price of redemption, and a spirit of adoption." Therefore Christ uses the parables of the sheep, the drachma, and of the father and his son.[19]

We can be amazed by such ingenuous exegesis, but let us retain only the theological idea or the theology of salvation which is indicated: "As the *pietas* of the father towards the son is extreme, so the divine piety towards the converted sinner appears extreme (*maxima*)." This commentary moralizes the parable throughout when it explains at large the conduct of the prodigal son, his misery, his conversion or penance. At first sight, the description of the father's mercy[20] also appears as moralized. The father is merciful 1) by accepting the conversion of the sinner, i.e., a) receiving the unworthy, b) clothing the naked, and c) feeding the hungry, 2) by appeasing the anger of the son who remained obedient.

But we at once pass over to a tropological meaning. The description, in reality, follows the sequence of the different steps required in the renewal (*reparatio*) of the soul brought about by the Father's mercy: a) The soul is received into the kindness of divine grace (*benignitas gratiae*); b) the soul is clothed with justice; c) the soul is restored by the sweetness of joy (*suavitas laetitiae*) and interior delight.

The text "While he was still a long way off" receives a metaphorical interpretation – the sin which leads away from God. The text "his father saw him and was moved by mercy" (*misericordia motus*) means the "prevenient grace." The text "he ran to him and flung his arms around him" means the "concomitant grace." This latter explanation is illustrated by the Song of Songs 2:6, "His left arm was under my head, his right embraced me." Bonaventure quotes the *Glossa ordinaria* to explain that the divine embrace is the humanity of the Word made flesh. The text "he kissed him" means the "subsequent grace," but it is the kiss of love and peace which the spouse in the Song of Songs (1:1) speaks about. Here appears excessively (*nimius*) the *affectus pietatis* by which

[19] Ibid. VI – Op. VII, 393.

[20] "Misericordia pii patris," ibid. 33 – Op. VII, 394.

God the Father gives the greatest sign of his love (*dilectio*) for the sinner who comes back to him. Here Bonaventure does not translate the Greek meaning of *misericordia* (which is *misericordia visceralis*, as indicated in other texts of Bonaventure). He retains the spiritual and mystical language of the embrace and the kiss: "God the Father acknowledges that we are his sons when we embrace him in a mutual love."

Finally the commentary stresses the divine mercy in its most intimate manifestation of the Incarnation of the Son, quoting Psalm 84:11, "*Justitia et pax osculatae sunt.*" Bonaventure adds: "the origin of this kiss is in the Word made flesh, in whom we find the union of supreme love . . . by which God embraces us and we embrace God."[21] Therefore the evangelical mercy retains its specificity. It has nothing to do with the piety or alms given by a superior to his inferior. It is a love which puts the offender and offended on the same level, or in symbolic language, the Father and Son are one, or the bride and bridegroom are equal.

How does one imitate this exemplary mercy of God? Bonaventure relates the different examples given to us by God, which he takes from a homily on the following text, "*Estote misericordes sicut et pater vester.*"[22] He explains that it is Christ who invites us to follow the example of the divine mercy; for the mercy of the Father and the mercy of the Son are one and the same (*misericordia Dei*). The exemplarity comes from above (God), but it is manifested in the Son of God made flesh. Let us note again the variety of terms: *opera misericordiae et caritatis*, *opera pietatis et misericordiae*,[23] and the divine mercy is exemplar for us as "*regula divinae pietatis, exemplum benignitatis et misericordiae.*[24] The divine exemplarity (*divina exemplaritas*) directs our reason in a threefold way.

First it appeals to our reason as a freely given call (*instantia gratuitae vocationis*), for "the merciful God saw that he was held shamefully in contempt by sinners, but did not disdain to send his own son, and first offered them peace by his earnest and free call." We imitate such an example when "we take the initiative to ask for peace from those who persecute and offend us, even if there is no blame on our part." Once again, Bonaventure quotes the biblical image "*induite viscera misericordiae*, clothe yourself with deep mercy, like the true and beloved Son of God, Father of mercy, who came from above by the depth of his mercy (*per viscera suae misericordiae, veniens ex alto*).[25] He first offered us peace,

[21] Ibid., p. 395.
[22] Lk. 6:36, cf. in Dom. I, Pent, Sermo I – Op. IX, 347ff.
[23] Ibid., 347A.
[24] Ibid., 347A.
[25] Cf. Lk. 1:78.

calling us to penance."[26] Thus *misericordia* means to initiate peace and reconciliation toward the enemy, the persecutor, and the offender in order to imitate God who opened the bosom of his mercy to sinners. This meaning is imaged and symbolized in the Incarnation-Crucifixion.

Secondly, divine mercy is also *patientia diuturnae exspectationis* (patience able to wait a long time) for the sinner offends his Creator and in his own heart crucifies the Son of God while meriting total ruin. But divine mercy is waiting for the sinner with patience, as if concealing his sins. We imitate this aspect of mercy – an inexhaustible patience – when we support the defects of others, their hardened words and deeds without anger, even for a long time (*longanimiter*) awaiting their own voluntary self-amendment.

Thirdly, the divine providence is *clementia* in the acceptance of the prodigal son. We note that the son repented, forced by other needs, and nevertheless the Father accepted him. There is a place for pardon.[27] According to the invitation to the Ephesians (4:32), "*Estote invicem benigni, misericordes, donantes invicem sicut et Deus in Christo donavit vobis,*" we imitate this example when we welcome our enemies and forget any debts (*condonare*). This time the stress is put on mutual forgiveness.

Bonaventure then moves on to the "useful" effects of mercy.[28] On the one hand, based on the last judgment, he lists the traditional grouping of works of mercy: "*visito, poto, cibo, redimo, tego, colligo, and condo.*"[29] On the other hand, these works are summarized in the giving of alms (Daniel 4:24), a work of mercy which takes away sins. Finally we have here the importance of mercy at the last judgment according to James 2:13, "*Judicium sine misericordia illi qui non fecit misericordiam.*" Bonaventure reminds us that these works of mercy are also spiritual.[30] We know the list: to instruct the ignorant, counsel the weak, console the afflicted, to set right the fallen, to forgive offenses, to support others, to pray for all. These spiritual works of mercy are even to be preferred to the corporal works of mercy if there is a choice.[31] The classical problem of mercy and justice is their union in God. Bonaventure, knowing the multiplicity of meaning given to these terms, defines this union in the works of God under three aspects.[32] In the broadest sense, mercy is the overflowing of divine

[26] Ibid., 347B.

[27] "Venia," – Ibid. 348; cf. St. Aug. in Joann. 33, n. 8.

[28] Ibid., 348.

[29] This last work of mercy is taken from Tobit 2:7; cf. Lactantius, Divinae Instit., VI PL 6, 676-684.

[30] "Vitis Mystica," add. IV, cap. 32, 117-Op. VIII, 215.

[31] Apol. Paup. XII, 9 – Op. VIII, 319.

[32] Sent. IV, Dist. 46, a.2 – Op. IV, 962ff.

goodness (*affluentia divinae bonitatis*), and justice is the proper application of divine goodness (*divinae bonitatis condecentia*). All God's works come from the overflowing of divine goodness, but are done within the limits of what is fitting (*decet*) to the divine goodness. Mercy and justice are therefore united.

In the ordinary meaning of the words, mercy is goodness which gives good things in excess (*benignitas in supererogatione*), and justice is generosity in giving awards (*liberalitas in retributionem praemiorum*). Both are united because God awards those who are worthy, going beyond their merits. But strictly speaking, mercy means "compassion in the alleviation of evils *(pietas in sublevatione malorum*)." Justice is "strictness in punishing evils (*severitas in retributione malorum*);" God unites them, for he never punishes without a certain remission of the penalty which is due. We differentiate between justification (mercy) and retribution (justice). But God, when justifying us, remits – with mercy – the offense of sin and everlasting punishment. Nevertheless, he inflicts – with justice – a temporal punishment.

In our Baptism, the mercy of God cannot retract the sentence against sinful humanity, but God applies the remedy with infinite mercy, *sententia remanente*.[33] Then, when we sometimes say that mercy is more manifest in the Incarnation (the first coming of the Lord) and justice more in the Parousia (the second coming of the Lord), our language is an appropriation because in the divine works, mercy and justice are united.

In reality, it is not in God, but in creatures, that we find the differences between justice and mercy. The effect of justice is the retribution; the effect of mercy though superior to justice falls short of a comprehensive notion of mercy which includes strict retribution. In God, mercy and justice are only one cause.[34]

## St. Thomas

With Thomas Aquinas – especially in his *Summa* – we can verify how the scholastic definitions make precise the Christian vocabulary in the classification of the virtues, the gifts, and the beatitudes. Thomas first defines mercy as an interior effect of charity (with joy and peace).[35] He follows the definitions of Aristotle,[36] of Saint John Damascene,[37] and especially the one of Saint Augustine[38] which is also Ciceronian: "Mercy is heartfelt sympathy for another's

[33] Sent. IV, dist., XV, P. I., art. 2 – Op. IV, 96-98.
[34] Sent. IV, Dist. 46, dub. 5 – Op. IV, 868.
[35] S. Th. II-II, q. 30, art. 1
[36] "Rhetoric," II, i: 1385B, 13.
[37] "De fide orth. II," 14: PG 94, 932.
[38] De civ., c. 6- PL 41, 261.

distress, impelling us to succor him if we can" (*Misericordia est alienae miseriae in nostro corde compassio...*). There also appears the etymology *miserum cor supra miseria alterius.*[39] We feel compassionate, that is, we grieve or sorrow as if the distress of the other is one of our own. This happens in two ways: First we are united in our affections by love (*unio affectus*); secondly, there is a type of real union. The distress of the other is felt so close to us that it seems to be within us. In this last sense, the more sensitive people are, the more merciful they will be.[40] Consequently, Thomas distinguishes two meanings: 1) mercy as passion when we refer to the emotion felt in our sensitivity (*motus appetitus sensitivi*); 2) mercy as virtue when we refer to the displeasure we feel in meeting another's evil – the movement of the intellectual appetite (*motus appetitus intellectivi*) – because this mercy, or displeasure ruled in accordance with reason, can also submit to reason the emotions of the lower appetite.[41] Saint Augustine is quoted again, "this compassion (i.e., mercy) obeys the reason when mercy is vouchsafed (granted) in such a way that justice is safeguarded..."[42]

Can we say that mercy is the greatest of virtues, since according to the Bible we are told that God "desired mercy and not sacrifice (Os. 6:9; Matthew 12:7)"?[43] Thomas answers with the text of Colossians 3:12-14, "*Induite viscera misericordiae....* Put on...the bowels of mercy...." and the following, "above all, have charity." Therefore charity is the greatest virtue, and not mercy. But the commentary notes that "a virtue may take precedence over other virtues in two ways: in itself or in relation to its subject."[44] If we consider the virtues in themselves, "mercy is the greatest of them because it is an effusion over someone else to help him in his needs; this characterizes those who are superior; in this meaning, mercy is even proper to God, the Supreme Being." Commenting on "blest are the merciful,"[45] Thomas unites justice and mercy as complementary virtues. Justice without mercy is cruelty (*crudelitas*), and mercy without justice is the mother of moral dissolution (*mater dissolutionis*). Both have to temper one another: *conjunctae ut altera ab altera debeat temperari.*"[46]

However, the evangelical beatitudes are more than virtues; they manifest a life open to the Holy Spirit and his gifts. Thomas links the beatitude of mercy

[39] Cf. also Sent. IV, dist. 15, 2, 1, 3 ad 2- in Mt. 5:7: Ed. Parma X, 52.
[40] S.Th. II-II, q. 30, art. 2.
[41] Ibid, art. 3.
[42] De civ. IX, c.5 – PL 41, 26.
[43] Cf. *Great Books of the Western World,* vol. 20, Thomas Aquinas, II, p. 535.
[44] In se – and quoad habentem: Ibid, art. 4c.
[45] In Mt. 5:7 – Ed. Parma X, 52.
[46] "Catena aurea," in Mt. 5:8 – Parma XI, 57.

to the gift of counsel, which then is connected with the virtue of prudence.[47] "Blest be the merciful" is then a perfection, which through prudence (the fulcrum of all the other virtues) elevates all our morality to the level of the God of mercy. In fact, the cardinal virtue of prudence, as charioteer among the virtues, is completed by the gift of counsel by which the Spirit of God guides directly our intuitions in order to transform our human "counseling" into a divine one for the most difficult decisions. Such a life will end one day in the everlasting Beatitude, but even now, the Spirit of God gives it a perfect accomplishment in the "Blest be the merciful, for they will obtain mercy."

Indeed this beatitude is connected with the gift of counsel which concerns whatever is useful for our everlasting end, and mercy is what is the most useful, according to 1 Timothy 4:8: *pietas ad omnia utilis est.* Using the traditional identification of *pietas-misericordia,* Thomas attempts to join the judgment that Christ announced with what the tradition has summarized in the works of mercy. The beatitude of the merciful transforms their lives into the most perfect union with the charity of Christ and prepares them for the last judgment. Thomas also quotes Augustine[48] who denounced the frequent confusion between piety and mercy. He gives a more formal meaning to *pietas* in his classification of the virtues and gifts. This is another good example of Christian terminology (*justitita- pietas- misericordia*) rooted first of all in biblical themes.

Piety is included in the vast spectrum of the cardinal virtue of justice as a virtue inclining us to render the reverence, the esteem, the services which are due, after God, to our parents, our country, etc, a filial and patriotic piety.[49] Piety also means a gift of the Holy Spirit according to the Latin translation of Isaiah 11:2.[50] It is the motion – the instinct – of the Holy Spirit by whom we address God as "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15). This filial piety towards God transforms our justice, which will be defined – consequently – by relations based on our universal brotherhood in God, Father of us all. It is a justice – and in particular the virtue of religion – inspired by the love of God. Following the authority of Augustine, he links the "Blest be the meek (*Mites*)" to the gift of piety,[51] but he notes that the Bible gives more logical links: "Blest be the merciful," and "Blest are those who are hungry and thirsty for justice" are both beatitudes better linked with piety.[52]

[47] II-II, q. 52.
[48] De civ. X, 1: PL 41, 279.
[49] II-II, q. 101.
[50] II-II, q, 120
[51] Serm. Pom, in Monte, lib. 1, cap. 1; PL 34, 1234.
[52] II-II, q. 121, art. 1, ad 3; art. 2.

Our mercy imitates God's mercy. Saint Thomas quotes "Be merciful, as your Father in heaven... (Luke. 6:36)" in the sense of forgiveness of offenses.[53] However, the general definition of divine mercy is determined, on one hand, by an analogy with ours but, on the other hand, according to the classical problem of its union with divine justice (*justitia-veritas*).[54] When we say, by analogy, that God is merciful, it does not mean the sadness or the sorrow that we feel at the sight of another's distress (*affectus passionis*) but the activity which results from this feeling (*secundum effectum*) to put away the distress (*repellere miseriam alterius*).[55] In fact, God cannot feel human distress as his own, but he is the first fountain of the goodness necessary to be merciful. Thus, mercy is a divine attribute in the highest degree.

How do we differentiate attributes like *liberalitas*, *bonitas*, *justitia*, *misericordia*? They are various aspects under which we look at God bestowing perfections on his creatures. This communication, when considered in the absolute, is a work of goodness in so far as the communication is done according to what is due. We see it as justice in so far as it is done by God, not in his own interest, but because of his goodness. It is liberality in so far as God eradicates defects. It is mercy.

There is no contradiction between divine justice and mercy in particular.[56] When God acts mercifully, he never goes against his justice,[57] but he manifests his mercy by doing something more than strict justice. His works are always both, just and merciful.[58] They are just, because they are done in accord with divine wisdom and goodness. It is a debt on the part of God. His works are also just because they are directed to the good of the creature (*debitum Deo* and *creaturae*). But they are just also because they presuppose the mercy of God: They are founded on his mercy. In fact, all creation has, as its first cause, the Divine Goodness, which is merciful because it exceeds all what is due to creatures (*abundantia bonitatis excedit onmem proportionem creaturae*).[59] Even in the damnation of the reprobate, mercy is manifest though it does not totally remit, yet somewhat alleviates, in punishing short of what is deserved.[60] Divine mercy is therefore a superabundant goodness characterized by its excess, which goes beyond our knowledge and the exigencies of our too strict logic. But the

[53] "Veniam peccantibus praebet," S. Th. III, 1. 84, art. 10. Sed contra.
[54] S. Th. I, q. 21.
[55] Ibid, art. 3.
[56] Ibid, art. 3.
[57] Ibid, art. 3, ad 2.
[58] Ibid, art. 4.
[59] Ibid.; cf. Sent. IV, Dist, 46, J. 2, art. 1, q. Ic. Superabundat in bono.
[60] S. Th. I, q. 21, art. 4, ad 1 – transi. Basic writings. V. I, p. 228.

divine attribute is made precise by analogy with our virtue of mercy: goodness alleviating another's misery ( *bonitas relata ad repellendam miseriam*) and with unselfishness.

This mercy, as already said, is proper to God.[61] Ridding us from our miseries, God manifests his power in the highest degree.[62] Here we have to make more precise the Thomist signification of *miseria*. The term is opposed to *felicitas*, the happiness in which we enjoy what we want.[63] Therefore *miseria* means all that humans suffer against their will, anything contrary either to the natural tendencies (*appetitus naturalis*), or to our deliberate choice (*voluntas electionis*), or to our whole will (e.g., when evil strikes someone who has always striven to do good). Consequently, *miseria* means not every defect, but only those which afflict our rational being with unhappiness.[64]

Since our happiness essentially comes from perfect virtue, *miseria*, in the first meaning of the term, is sin.[65] In the classifications of Saint Thomas (*peccatum naturae, artis, voluntatis*)[66] it is sin in the moral meaning (*voluntatis*) which is the chief misery of mankind,[67] if it separates us from God (*peccatum mortale*).[68] Though sin (*culpa*) is first of all punishable, nevertheless sin already includes a certain *poena*, something which is against the will of the sinner, and therefore he attracts compassion.[69] Thus the mercy towards sinners (*misereri et parcere*) is proper to God *secundum se*.[70] To punish the sinner is within God's justice because of our sins. It does not mean that sin could be a cause of divine mercy. The very cause of divine mercy is in God himself – his Love.[71] Sin is only the "place" (*locus*) where this mercy is exercised and is the matter of divine mercy (*materia misericordiae*).

The mercy of God is therefore superior to human mercy because of the supereminence of its gratuitousness,[72] and because divine mercy alone is able to change the heart and the will of a sinner, rending him penitent.[73] It is a work of mercy where the all-powerfulness of God shows its greatest manifestation.

[61] In Ps. 50, 1 – Sent. IV, dist. 46, q. 2, art. 2 q. 2 ad 1 – Ibid, q. 2, art. 1, q. 1 c.
[62] S. Th. II-II q. 20, art. 4 c.
[63] II-II q. 30, art. 1.
[64] S. Th. I, q. 30, art. 4- Sent. IV, dist. 46, q. 2 art. 2, a. 2c.
[65] Sent. II dist. 34, a. 1, art. 2c – in Ps. 24, n. 5.
[66] S. Th. I, q. 63, art. 1.
[67] De malo, q. 3, art. 1.
[68] S. Th. I-II, q. 72, art. 5.
[69] II-II, q. 30, art. 1, ad 1.
[70] II-II, q. 21, art. 2.
[71] II-II, q, 30, art. 2, ad 1.
[72] In Ps. 40:5, no. 3.
[73] III, q. 80, art. 2, ad 3.

## Conclusion

Saint Bonaventure and Saint Thomas both wanted to preserve the expressive and colorful language of the Bible, but by analysis and synthesis, they also tried to give more precision to the vocabulary they found in the Latin translation, the Vulgate. The terminology of mercy is employed in the work of Bonaventure with all the traditional meanings, but it receives a spiritual and mystical significance, especially when Bonaventure puts great emphasis on the experience of Saint Francis of Assisi, the founder of the *Minores*. We are to imitate the mercy of Christ, who is true God made true man, and therefore able to manifest within the various aspects of our human nature the merciful goodness of God. As pointed out in the Letter to the Hebrews (4:15), Christ became the priest with compassion for us. He is, with his Father, the Father of all mercy.

Saint Thomas also retains the various meanings of mercy inherited from Greek (especially Aristotelian) philosophy, from the Bible, and from Christian tradition. But he elaborated a theological synthesis, which is based, on one hand, upon a very deep analysis of the analogies between God and humans. On the other hand, he sees in God and his Goodness the fountain of our being and of our perfection, the end towards which we must return. Mercy is defined in God as an attribute absolutely characteristic of God as he revealed himself. The definition sets aside the metaphorical aspects drawn from our emotional compassion. Further, we must not make this mercy into a kind of diminished justice.

God is both infinitely just and merciful, but above all, he is merciful. In moral theology, mercy is first defined as a special virtue, the direct effect of the theological virtue of charity and therefore not included in the general systematization based on the cardinal virtues. Mercy as a beatitude perfecting the gift of counsel, characterizes prudence, the virtue which regulates all our morality. Such an analysis gives the biblical theme of *misericordia* (or *pietas*) once again the unique importance which Saint Luke stressed when he replaced the "Be perfect as our heavenly Father..." of Saint Matthew (5:48) with the "Be merciful as your heavenly Father..." (Luke 6:36).

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